

lipstick kisses and frankenstein stitches by RiverTuonen

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Summary:

Stevie Harrington and Nancy Wheeler are in love, except when they're not, and the worst thing about the monsters under the bed is that sometimes they wear human faces.

lipstick kisses and frankenstein stitches

Author's Note:

I don't know why my natural response to loving a character is "yes, let's hurt this one." Maybe I should be worried. Also I got to thinking about how Steve and Nancy's storyline would work if both were women, and this happened.

This might turn into a series. Who knows.

Oh, and I moved up the timeline by like a week because of a scene I cut out, which made it completely useless anyway.

Six hours and a day after Stevie and the gang of preteen misfits light an alternate dimension on fire, she steps into first period as the bell rings wearing one of Joyce Byers' dresses and no makeup hide to the horror show painted across her face.

Mrs. Owens, who started roll call early, stutters to a stop on Lisa Fitzgibbons' name. From the third seat, third row, middle of the room, Carol with her perfectly applied eyeshadow and the three hundred dollar dress her mom brought back from Paris last year, says loud enough for the whole class to hear, "Oh my god, Stevie, what *happened?* "

"Take a seat, Miss Harrington," the teacher says, blinking rapidly, and looks back to her attendance sheet. "Joe?"

With her back straight and chin level with the floor, Stevie takes her seat in the front row. Her hair, which she had time to style in the hours when she couldn't sleep, at least covers the stitches. "Here," she says evenly when Mrs. Owens calls her name, though speaking hurts. Breathing hurts. Thinking hurts. Even the lights, which are fluorescent and bright and white in that way that makes the teacher's wiry grey hair glow, hurt.

A note lands on her lap before roll call ends, tossed there courtesy of

Linda, who sits behind her. *Are you okay* , it reads in Tommy's second-grade-level scratchy handwriting. Stevie crumbles it into a ball, and hopes that's the end of it.

It's not.

"Stephanie." Mrs. Owens passes around a review packet on last week's lesson— *Wuthering Heights* and Gothic motifs—and beckons Stevie to the front of the class. "Stephanie," she says once she's pulled up the second chair and asked Stevie to sit, like she can't fucking stand on her own, and draws the attention of the entire class. She feels twenty-two pairs of eyes on her, all watching her back under the harsh, cold, impersonal light. "You know if something's wrong," her teacher says carefully, "that you can always talk to me, right? Or another adult in the school?"

Five hours and a day ago, Stevie lay in the back seat of her own car, bleeding all over Joyce's towels, because she "nearly got herself killed" protecting a bunch of kids. Nancy drove with Lucas in the front seat, a map in one hand and a flashlight in the other as he directed her to the hospital on the other side of town. Dustin kept shaking Stevie's shoulder, telling her to stay awake. Her head was bleeding. Smoke and otherworldly dust clung to her lungs.

There's not a way to talk to any teacher about this even if she wanted, but everyone's going to know the half-truth soon. Joyce and Hopper, still so righteously angry at the world that they were ready to be angry at anything, made damn sure Billy Hargrove spent the rest of the night in a cell for breaking and entering and beating the shit out of a classmate.

"I know," she says flatly, but doesn't elaborate.

For a long moment, Mrs. Owens just stares at her, gaze as intense as her students. Then she turns, reaching across her desk to the short stack of hall passes, and drags one over. The strain makes the blue veins in her sagging upper arm bloat.

"You're going to go to the nurse," she says as she fills it out, "and she's going to send you home. I know you've been trying very hard to maintain your attendance this year, but I'm sure the rest of your

teachers will understand.”

The hospital’s exemption note for absences grows heavy in her pocket, the pocket of Nancy’s jacket, which was still her in her trunk from the party the other night and doesn’t match Joyce’s dress. “I’m fine,” she says. “It’s worse than it looks.”

As she forces the paper slip into her hand, Mrs. Owens says, “Go home home, Stephanie. I’m sure Miss Wheeler will be happy to bring you your makeup work.”

“But—”

“Go *home*. ”

She says it forcefully. With a frown that cracks Stevie’s already cracked lip, she stands, and ignores the forty-four eyes watching her back. “Thank you, Mrs. Owens,” she says, then walks back to her desk to take her handbag and notebook, and leaves. Those forty-four eyes watch her retreat.

In the nurse’s office, she tries to plead her case, but Mrs. Scully agrees with Mrs. Owens. “How did you get to school this morning?” she asks after she deems Stevie unfit to handle the rest of the day, or maybe longer. “Did your parents drive you? Will your mom come get you?”

Both her parents are abroad, her mom in Barcelona to “take a break for all this stress” and her dad in Japan for business, so she does the only thing she can think of a phones Joyce. “I’m sorry,” she says, wrapping the plastic cord around her index finger. The chair is hard against her bruised back. The nurse watches her intently, listening for lies. “Nancy has my keys still and they won’t let me stay.”

She’ll say no, Steve thinks, but instead, without hesitation, Joyce says, “I just need to get Will ready. Give me twenty minutes. Don’t move around too much.”

Then she hangs up, leaving Steve alone in silence with the nurse, who never fully looks away.

Stevie Harrington wears the latest fashion. Stevie Harrington wears red lipstick. She plays softball, which means she's athletic. She smokes cigarettes like Michelle Pfeiffer in *Grease 2*, and knows how to get even hard liquor. She owns a car. Her hair is always perfect.

"You're, like, a fucking dream, Harrington," Tommy H. told her once in eighth grade when he was sky high on weed he scored from his cousin behind the bleachers after school. They were fourteen, she moved to town two months earlier, and he and Carol started dating three weeks before that. Back then, he was the only person Stevie knew who smoked. "Hawkins doesn't make chicks like you."

No, Hawkins doesn't make girls like her, because she carefully constructed herself on the day she stood in front of Mr. Clarke's science class and said, "Call me Stevie. Everyone else does."

Though *Stevie* isn't a traditionally good name for The Most Popular Girl in School, she wanted to leave Stephie with her Peter Pan pixie cut and braces back in Derry, Maine. No one called her Stevie. Hawkins Middle School didn't need to know that.

What they also didn't know was this:

On the day the house officially sold, on the day Mom and Dad dared to sit together for the first family dinner in weeks, Stephanie let her tuna casserole grow cold on her plate and said, "I like girls."

It was already silent, with Mom focusing on her food and Dad focusing on the business section of the *New York Times*, but the silence deepened in the wake of their daughter's announcement. Slowly, Mom raised her eyes. Dad stilled, a half-turned page trapped between two fingers. Their shirts—hers orange, his green—clashed noticeably.

"What?" Mom said, and smiled. "I'm sorry, darling. I wasn't paying attention."

Stephanie swallowed hard, mouth dry. "I like girls."

With a laugh a note higher than normal, Mom asked, "What about

Eddie Hozier, darling?”

Eddie Hozier was twig skinny and always gave Stephanie his spare pencil during pre-algebra. Last year she did like him. Then she met Rachael. Rachael with her brightly colored tshirts, her hair a Snow White black, *her* spare pencil always stabbed through a bun.

“Yeah,” Stephanie said, struggling to explain what she barely understand herself. “I like boys. I just also like girls, I guess.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

Shrugging, she says, “Yeah it does. I like girls like I like guys.”

There was another silence, longer this time. Eventually, Dad said, “No, young lady. You don’t.” He said it definitively. He made it a fact.

So Stevie Harrington of Hawkins, Indiana liked boys and only boys, lost her virginity when she was fifteen to Ross Eldridge at his senior prom after dating him *just* long enough to avoid the slut label, and went through dates easier than she went through shoes. She wore nice clothes, and red lipstick, and had perfect hair. She was a good girl who kissed boys and only boys, but never too much, because oh, she was a *dream*.

The first time one of Stevie’s old friends calls her a dyke, she’s still high on adrenaline from bashing a monster from another world with a nail-spiked baseball bat. “Halfway there, Nicole,” she says. It’s Saturday morning, and she and Nancy stand huddled together against the November cold in the parking lot of the convenience store while Jonathan runs inside to buy cigarettes and Kit Kats.

“Shit, Harrington,” says Chris, Nicole’s boyfriend, ignoring Nancy completely, “how many guys did you fuck just to—”

Laughing, just as beat down exhausted and half-crazy from last night as Stevie, Nancy says, “Fuck you,” like it’s simple, and makes it that

simple when she tugs Stevie closer by the collar of her dress, and kisses her.

People graffiti their lockers, and whisper insults behind their backs. Over Christmas break, Jonathan punches Tommy in the face so hard that he and Carol don't look at them for months. Some time around the start of spring semester, Mike and his friends get into a fight in the middle of PE in defense of his sister's honor. It's the one instance in the growing line of apparent fuck ups that Mrs. Wheeler doesn't ground him for.

Though Stevie and Nancy should care, probably, they don't. After fighting a faceless monster from an alternate dimension, it's hard to care about rumors and paint, and they're just—they're too busy being happy.

“*Oh, I'm walking on sunshine,*” Nancy sings one Tuesday in July in the passenger seat of the car, when it's hot and sticky and Stevie speeds down the highway to Tippecanoe Lake. The wind whips her newly cut hair around her face, strands of it sticking in her pale pink lipglass. She's stripped down to a camisole and her shortest shorts, revealing all her birdlike bones.

“Your taste in music is shit,” Jonathan says from the backseat, raising his voice above the wind and Nancy's singing. They bought him a bathing suit without his permission, and stole him away from Will to drag him on a weekend beach trip.

Stevie agrees—Nancy's taste in music is fucking awful—but she'll never say it. “You can choose next,” she says, sharing a glance and a private smile with him in the rearview mirror.

He doesn't choose next. For the next half hour, they listen to *Uptown Girl*, and Mariah Carey, and whatever else comes on, and speed down an empty road that smells of car exhaust and heat. At two in the afternoon, Stevie pulls into a rest stop for gas and coffee. She kisses Nancy, not giving a damn if anyone sees, and steps out to refill the tank while the other two scramble to get drinks.

“*Ain't no sound but the sound of his feet,*” Freddie Mercury sings, his voice floating through the open windows, though they turned the

radio down low, “ *Machine guns ready to go .*” A cat hisses behind the line of cars awaiting repairs, followed by a bird screeching. Inside the convenience store, she can see Nancy and Jonathan filling paper coffee cups, her head tipped back as she laughs and his ducked to hide his face. Less than a year ago, Stevie slapped him because he took stalker pictures and she thought the two of them slept together, and now they hardly go anywhere without him.

By the time they’re all back in the car, gas paid for and coffee bought, Queen’s on again and singing about cool cats in new hats. “Satisfied, Byers?” she asks as she lits a cigarette.

“Yeah, whatever,” he says, which means he is, so she starts the car and pulls back out onto the highway. It’s summer, Jonathan’s satisfied with Queen, and Nancy’s thin fingers play with the trailing hair that fell from Stevie’s bun.

The year is 1984, and goddammit, she’s happy.

At one of Marcie Doyle’s many house parties, Nancy gets sloppy drunk and says, “It’s all bullshit,” while she stands in the stark white bathroom in her stark white dress now stained through with a cheap red mixed drink. Then she says, “ *You’re* bullshit.”

The world tilts. Narrows. For a moment, the signals between her lungs and her brain stop functioning, and she forgets to breath.

Nancy talks about killing Barb. Nancy says, “Like we’re in love.”

“Like we’re in love?”

“It’s bullshit,” says Nancy.

Stevie steps out. Slams the door. Breathes. Locks eyes with Jonathan, jerks her head, and breathes again. “She’s drunk,” she says. The room’s too hot, thick with teenage bodies all filled up with mystery liquor and Friday night lust. “I can’t—carry her. Take her home.”

“Do you need a ride?” Jonathan asks. “Are you good to drive?”

“I didn’t drink,” she says, which true, because she knew she was driving, and she didn’t want to get them killed. “Look. Just. Make sure she gets home.”

There’s a question written across Jonathan’s face, a simple “what happened?” but he doesn’t ask. “Okay,” he says. “Get back safe.”

Halfway home, Stevie slams on the breaks and stops the car on the side of the road. She stumbles out, barefoot, because she refuses to drive in heels, and clutches the car door for support as she gasps for air. Frost-slick glass soaks her feet and ankles. Wind cuts through her red dress, razor sharp. Just past the outer reaches of the streetlight’s halo glow is the forest. These days there are no monsters in the wood, but she still feels the darkness between the trees watching her.

“Get it together, Harrington,” she says aloud, but the words fall flat, unheard. If a tree falls in a forest and there’s no one to hear it, did it really make a sound at all?

Fuck that.

Nancy is her grounding point, or Nancy and Jonathan, but without her there’s no him. Some nights, when Stevie’s all alone in her parents’ big, drafty house with its huge windows facing the pool and the woods, she can’t sleep without the desk lamp on. The sight of Christmas lights turns her stomach. Last softball season she hit more homeruns than ever, because an instinctual impulse told her she needed to protect herself every time she swung the bat.

After ten minutes, her heartbeat’s back to normal, so she slips into the car and lights a cigarette. During their first dinner with Barb’s parents back in the summer, Mrs. Holland took Stevie and Nancy’s hands and said, “My Barbara would be so proud of you.”

Fuck that. Fuck this . Barb left that night with strict instructions to also kick out Tommy and Carol. “If you can’t be yourself,” she said as she shrugged on her coat, because she and Stevie had already had *that* talk, “at least have fun. Alone.”

It's all bullshit, Nancy said. Nancy said, Like we're in love.

"Is that why you stayed with me?" Stevie wants to ask the next afternoon when Nancy confronts her at track practice about her day long avoidance. "Because it's what your dead best friend would like?"

Instead, Stevie says, "Real great you don't remember, Nance. I'm pretty sure you broke up with me."

Out on the field, Coach Raymond blows her whistle, and rallies the team together. Nancy's face pales. "What?"

Stevie tells her what happened, unapologetically blunt. Though she know she sounds bitter, she's too exhausted to care.

"Look, I," Nancy starts, but stops when Stevie shakes her head. "I was drunk. I didn't mean any of it."

"Then do it," Stevie says, looking her girlfriend directly in the eye. "Tell me you love me." This is the girl she loves in a way she's never loved anyone, who she tore apart her perfect life for, who she fought a nightmare for, so she needs to hear her it.

But Nancy falters.

"I need to get back to practice," Stevie says.

"Wait, but—"

Like we're in love.

Yeah. Like they're in love. Loving Nancy is a sticky summer day at Tippecanoe Lake in the hour before a thunderstorm, the taste of boxed wine and fruity ice pops, stolen movements counting each other's freckles with kisses. *Like we're in love*. That—now, that's an October night on the roadside, a November morning ripping Christmas lights from ruined walls, the ignored *Missing?* posters of a dead teenage girl still posted throughout town, all flapping in the wind.

Loving Nancy was always terrifying. Not being loved back, though, that's, well.

That's worse.

Dad returns home after Halloween. "Oh," he says when he sees his daughter, voice weaker than she's ever heard, as he stands in her doorway. "Christ."

Not that long ago, Stevie washed away the face makeup the kids painted on, so every cut and bruise is on unobscured display. "It's not as bad as it looks," she says.

He steps forward, across her bedroom in three halting steps, and grabs her chin. "A boy did this to you?" he says, tilting her head to the side to get a clearer view of the stitches on her temple. His fingers are rough, and the sleeve of his business suit scrapes against her bruised jaw. "Your mother says it took hours to get you to the hospital."

"Well, thirteen-year-olds can't exactly drive," she says, stepping away from his grip so his hand falls back to his side. The lighting in her room feels hospital bright, harsh, and he stares at the little girl he doesn't know and never really knew, standing beneath the not-really-cold light in a floral nightgown that might be Nancy's. "It took a while for one of them to bike to a pay phone and call the hospital."

"What were you doing with middle schoolers?" her dad asks. Mom still hasn't.

"Picking them up, actually," she says. "Hargrove's step-sister was already freaking out, and they couldn't reach Nancy or Jonathan, so they called—"

"Nancy and Jonathan?" her dad says. "Wheeler and Byers?"

Sighing, frustrated, Stevie says, "Fuck, Dad. Yes. I'm friends with Jonathan. Nancy Wheeler's my girlfriend."

He takes a deep breath in and releases slowly. "Is that why the boy thought it was all right to do this do you?"

“What? No,” she says, startled. “Dad, he’s wails on his kid sister. He didn’t exactly need an a bullshit moral excuse to beat the shit out of me.” The sentence comes out sounding more like Nancy than like Stevie. Yeah. It’s all fucking bullshit. “Does my bisexuality seriously matter right now?”

Instead of answering, he reaches out again and touches the spot just below the stitches. “Did the doctor mention side effects?”

“Ask Mom.” The doctor had told Hopper and Joyce something about concentration and behavior, but when they relayed the message later, Stevie was so high on pain medication and sedatives she can’t remember. But Mom knows. Mom came back first, which means she saw the medical and police reports.

Again, Dad breathes deep and exhales. “That was brave of you,” he says, “protecting a group of scared kids. But if you ever get a call like that again, phone the police instead of handling it yourself.”

“Right,” she says, and when he looks at her pointedly, says it again and *promises*.

“Christ, Stevie,” he says suddenly, dropping his arm, taking a step back so the gap between them widens. There’s more grey in his hair and beard than the last time she saw him, which was less than a month ago. “Don’t say it like you’re doing me a favor.”

With the creak of a floorboard, her mother appears in the doorway, Old Hollywood elegant in the pink satin bathrobe she’s still wearing past noon, as though she does it regularly and not just when he’s home. They both fit into the image her bedroom makes better than she does: yellow walls and white curtains, a green duvet, matching pillows and clutter free, a hotel room type of perfect. When Dad turns and the two of them look at each other— *really* look at each other—it’s the most connected they’ve been in years. Maybe since Stevie was born.

“Honey,” Mom says slowly, like she’s taste testing the word. Joyce must have used it when they spoke in the phone. “You must have been up late last night. Do you want to lie down?”

“No, Mom, Dad, I’m *fine* —”

“Did he try anything else, Stephanie?” Dad cuts her off abruptly, avoiding her eye.

For a moment, she doesn’t know how to answer. I don’t remember, she nearly says, because it’s true, but the rumor that Billy Hargrove raped her is already going around the school, so she tells her parents, “No. No, he didn’t.”

Mom sighs, breathy, and Dad lets out a low noise in the back of his throat that almost sounds like a sob. “Thank god,” she says, hand pressed against her heart. “Oh, thank god.”

When Billy punches her in the gut, Stevie’s so surprised she doesn’t bother to defend herself. She gasps, folding in half, and distinctly hears the new girl shriek her name.

“Hey, asshole.” Her voice is strained. Clumsily, she twists, reaching to grab him at the belt loop of his stupid tight jeans. “Hey, ow!”

Inside, Lucas and Max and Mike and Dustin scream in unison, but pain spreads from her ribs where his stomach collided with her solar plexus and from her back where she hit the ground. Nancy wants them safe, she thinks, followed by: *I want them safe.*

A fucking teenage boy won’t be the end of her.

She drags herself to her feet, ignoring her protesting body, and rushes back into the Byers’ living room. That asshole all the girls think is so hot is so busy beating on Lucas that he doesn’t notice Stevie until she punches the back of his head.

“What,” he starts, eyebrows shooting up, as she gets a grip on his shirt and drags him away. A button somewhere pops; the shirt flies out of his pants, torn and loose. “Harrington?”

“Yeah,” she says, unamused, and punches him in the nose.

He lashes out, but she dodges once, twice, as the boys cheer her on and Max shouts for her brother to stop. Then Stevie shoves him forward with both hands, ramming him back into the kitchen sink, and doesn't seem him grab Joyce's plate.

Crash!

"Stevie!"

It's Mike, or at least she thinks. For a moment, her vision blanks into a sheet of white. As the world rightens itself, Billy gets a hand in her hair and drags her back against the wall. "You and Wheeler are the first dykes I've ever met," he says conversationally. "Promise to let me watch and I'll just take my little sister and go."

"What's wrong with you?" she says, and tries to knee him, but he catches her leg and pushes her sideways.

In a moment, he's on top of her, and even through the haze of pain, she registers her dress hiked nearly to waist. Beyond his shoulder, she sees Mike and his friends, all shaking, screaming for her to get up, for Billy to stop, that he's sick, they're going to call the police, he better—and she doesn't think he's going to rape her, or at least she that's what she hopes, but whatever happens, she doesn't need the kids her to witness it.

He grabs her hands when she tries to shove him away, and pins them over her head with one of his own so she's assaulted with the overbearing smell of men's deodorant and expensive cologne. "I hear you used to be a legend," he says all low like he's sharing a secret. "Is it true you fucked Redner to get an A in bio?"

"Nancy's going to shoot your dick off," she says, and loses consciousness when he punches her right above the left eye.

Later, she learned that Max shot him full of drugs and threatened to castrate him with Stevie's bat. Mike tells her in the few minutes before Nancy makes them both leave for home, because it's nearly noon on Sunday and they've been gone for days. "It was awesome," he says. "Or, it would be, but, you know. We kind of thought you were going to die."

Stevie scoffs. “You kids are so dramatic.”

Shaking his head, Mike says, “You just spent the night in the hospital. No, we’re not.”

In Hopper’s office half a week later, Mom clutches Stevie’s hand so hard it hurts, and tells Mr. and Mrs. Hargrove, “If he *ever* comes close to my daughter again, I’ll see he’s arrested and sue you for so much money your children will be paying it off at your funerals, do you understand me?”

“They’re all fucking liars, Dad, Officer,” Billy says to his parents and Officer Mason, the only other member of the force in the room, “and he knows it.” He points to Hopper, scowl firmly in place.

“Cute,” Hopper says. “I guess I’m also a liar now, Larry.”

“Already knew that, sir,” Officer Mason says, and doesn’t look convinced.

Mr. Hargrove’s scowl matches his son’s. “There are two sides of every story,” he starts, but his wife snaps, “Max confirmed it, you bastard,” which shuts him up faster than even Mom could.

“That’s because she’s the one who drugged me,” Billy says. “She’s a fucking psycho.”

As Mom says, “I think we can all agree we’re done here, can’t we?” she slips her hand away from Stevie’s to pet her hair instead. “You’re lucky my Stephie doesn’t want to press charges.”

A light flickers, and Mom moves her hand away. Stevie doesn’t realize she’s shaking until Hopper leans forward and says, “Hey, kid. You’re doing okay.” Then, louder: “Larry, show the Hargroves out.”

When Mom moves to take her hand again, she shrinks back. “It hurts,” she says in a mumble, because it’s better than saying she’d rather get this attention from Joyce, or the man behind the desk, or even absentminded Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler.

“Stevie,” Hopper says once the Hargroves are out of the room, “if does try anything again, you know where to find me.”

The tears start at that, the loud messy kind worthy of a John Hughes movie. “No,” she says, stumbling out of her chair when Mom reaches for her. “No, Mom, don’t touch me—”

“Stephie—”

“I-I just need a minute—”

“But—”

Clearing his throat, Hopper says, “It’s okay, Mrs. Harrington. I’ll send her out in a minute.”

Mom passes Stevie her handkerchief before leaving, not hiding her relief as well as she probably meant. Hopper, as ripped to shreds by flickering lights and government conspiracies as she is, steps around the desk and wraps her in a hug. “You’re all right,” he says, as though they ever spoke to each other more than a handful of times before now. “Shh. Come on. You’re safe. We’re all safe.”

Maybe they’re safe for *now* but they aren’t safe forever, which she knows with startling clarity, because she curled her body around a thirteen-year-old boy as a shield against a stampede of demon dogs, but it’s Billy Hargrove’s face she sees every time she turns off the lights.

Stevie and Nancy get back together on Halloween.

“Should you really be out?” Nancy asks after Max finishes sketching extra stitches around Stevie’s head with dollar store eyeliner. “Who are you supposed to be anyway?”

Shrugging, Stevie says, “Frankenstein’s bride? Fuck if I know,” and tucks her hair behind her ear. Sunlight comes through the window, throwing Nancy’s shadow in a thin, pale line up the Byers’ damaged living room wall.

For some reason, the kids still want to go trick-or-treating, which

Joyce agreed under the condition that Jonathan, Nancy, and Stevie *all* chaperone. El, the new girl, is with them, hidden beneath a mask with her bouncy curls in view.

“Well, you look good,” Nancy says with a strained smile. After a beat of uncomfortable silence, she says, “I can tell you think I slept with Jonathan, but I didn’t. And I really didn’t mean any of that stuff I said last week.”

Was it only a week ago? It feels like longer. Stevie uncurls from her place on the couch and stands. “Nancy,” she says, “it’s okay. I told you. You don’t need to apologize.”

“Stevie!” Dustin calls from the kitchen. “Stop playing with your hair and get in here!”

Nancy sighs, ignoring Dustin and ignoring her brother when he shouts for her to hurry. “Yeah, I do,” she says. “Apparently I gave Jonathan a recap in the car. He told me what happened. You’re not bullshit. I never thought you were. And.” She pauses, takes a deep breath, and says, “I love you, Stephanie Herrington.”

“I love you too,” Stevie says, says it easier than fruity ice pop kisses on a sticky summer day.

A couple days before Barb died, she cornered Stevie after track practice, and said, “Nancy’s family actually accept her. You’re going to make her feel like a freak again if you keep it all a secret.”

“Nancy went into this knowing the circumstances,” Stevie said, frowning. She was sweaty, her shirt sticking to her body and her bangs slick against her face. When she tried to walk away, Barb grabbed her. “Hey, I didn’t say you could touch me.”

“She’s my best friend,” the other girl said, frowning with force enough to match Stevie’s so her chubby cheeks wobbled. “I don’t want her getting hurt just so you can preserve your ego. God, do your friends even—Oh god,” she said when Stevie instinctively tensed.

“This isn’t just about your ego, is it?”

With that, Barb trapped her. “So not all parents are as perfect as yours or Nancy’s,” Stevie said, tugging on the towel draped over her neck. “Someone’s got to pull the short straw. If you fucking tell—”

“I won’t,” said Nancy’s best friend. “Look, I swear. You’re kind of a bitch, but I’m not going to out you.” Stevie slowly relaxed and Barb asks, obviously hesitant, “Why are you risking it?”

With half a laugh, Stevie answered, “Because she’s Nancy fucking Wheeler. I’d be crazier if I didn’t.”

She thinks about that a lot, later. About Barb in the alley by school, dressed like a librarian four times her age and chewing on her lip. She had no reason to give a shit, but she did. Just for that—for showing concern for the girl who was trying to screw the girl she definitely also liked—she was a better person than Stevie could ever hope to be.

The only person she ever tells this to is Jonathan, and the admission spills when she’s tipsy on whiskey in his bedroom because she’s afraid of her own empty house. “I didn’t really think about it when she was here,” she says, struggling to gather her thoughts into something coherent, “’cause, like, Nance totally didn’t like her back, but now that she’s dead it’s like. You know. How the fuck am I supposed to be as good as a ghost?”

With Will at the Wheelers’ for the night and Joyce on date night with her new boyfriend who isn’t the cop, Jonathan and Stevie are free to talk without risk of someone telling them to shut up. His whole mouth pinches, his face squishing in, and he says, “We’ve all made mistakes. That isn’t fair.”

“And that was the most cliché thing to say *ever*. ”

Even though it was, he doesn’t take it back. Instead he lumbers out of bed, swipes the bottle from the table, and pauses long enough before leaving the room to throw her a pair of pajamas. “You’re annoying when you’re drunk,” he says, and slips out before she can protest.

Barb hugged her before she left that night and told her not to be like a dude. That night, Jonathan took pictures he had no right taking, and caught Good Person Barbara Holland's last moments on film, so Stevie broke his camera and slapped him. Nancy slapped her. They rushed full throttle into a world of monsters that opened its arms and swallowed them whole.

Yeah, they've all made mistakes, except maybe Barb, but Stevie still feels like she's the only whose veins run with tar. That night the monster in forest could have taken anyone, so why didn't it take her instead?

Nancy, Jonathan, and Stevie hang out with the kids after Halloween, snacking on candy while the boys try to explain to the girls and them the logistics of *Dungeons and Dragons*. "Now that Max is here we've got enough members to make a full party," Lucas says, and the two share a shy look that lasts until they both look away. Dustin watches the exchange with his nose scrunched. Under the table, Mike and El hold hands. Will makes his way through a pack of Skittles, content with his sugar.

Meanwhile, Stevie sits between Nancy and Jonathan on the sagging old couch, crammed in tight. Her girlfriend puts a hand on her leg to keep it from bouncing. "So does that mean we don't have to play?" she asks, and graciously accepts a Almond Joy from Jonathan's outheld packet. Stevie shakes his head.

"Nah," Dustin says, propping his legs up on the edge of Will's chair. "Just means you're your own party. Like a side party."

"Thanks," Jonathan says, and Nancy rolls her eyes.

According to Mike, she's a rogue with a bow, because she's a long distance fighter; Jonathan's a cleric because he's smart but doesn't really fight; Stevie's a something because—well, she loses interest, zones out for a moment, and misses the reason.

“Okay,” she says, as though she was listening. Nancy and Jonathan whip to look at her, she blinking rapidly and he slowly.

“Awesome,” Dustin says through a mouthful of nougat. The sight is nauseating. After everything with the demidogs, she assumed he’d never be able to touch one again. “Now get over here so you guys can make your characters.”

Dutifully, they stand, though the couch’s springs groan at the movement. Stevie catches her reflection in a half-uncovered mirror kept down here as storage. Her face is pale, making her real stitches more obvious, and the sketched in ones are smudged. Next to Nancy, who’s Maid Marion costume is impeccable even after hours of wandering around Hawkins, looks infinitely better in comparison.

“Earth to Harrington,” Lucas says, waving a hand in her face. “It’s your turn to roll.”

El and Max, who learned to band together as the only girls of the group, share a look Stevie can’t read.

“Two nines,” El says when they stop rolling. “Is that good?” Even if she says innocently, Stevie suspects it is good, and the kid stopped those dice prematurely.

She doesn’t need favors, especially from a troop of children. “Yay,” she says, and slides into the seat Dustin grabs for her. Nancy and Jonathan end up on the other side of the table near their brothers, crammed close, and smile apologetically as though she really thinks they fucked.

Halfway through the game, she wakes to a hand on her shoulder, and shoots away so quickly she almost falls out of her chair. “What?” she says, before realizing it was Nancy, she’s in the Wheelers’ basement, and eight pairs of eyes are staring at her.

“I guess you’re still in the stage where you get tired easy,” her girlfriend says, and smiles so a line forms between her eyebrows.

“Yeah,” she says, dazed from the unexpected nap and a sudden headache she didn’t have before. “Maybe.”

That night, Mrs. Wheeler lets her stay in Nancy's bed. They sleep with the light on, and for a little while, Stevie forgets to be afraid.

In the end, Stevie writes a smartass college admissions essay about fighting monsters with her girlfriend as an allegory to coming out as bisexual in a homophobic small town. "Monsters are easier than people," she says, sounding so incredibly like Jonathan, when Nancy asks her why.

"You should have let me read it first," she says. Stevie shrugs, and picks at a thread on her jeans. A year ago she never would have let any of her jeans fray.

"Dustin proofread it for spelling mistakes," she says, like that's on the same level as having the smartest girl in school rewrite it to perfection to her. They're in Nancy's room, propped against her headboard among her troop of stuffed animals, while downstairs Mrs. Wheeler makes mushroom soup.

"Dustin? You trusted *Dustin*? "

Again, she shrugs. "Well, he found some."

When she first wrote her admissions essay, she tried to tie it to "achievement," which her teachers all said was the right thing to do. This was better; her three hundred fifty-two word essay, which is fifty-six words longer than her last one, is about survival. Stevie *survived* Demogorgon. She *survived* the demidogs, and the tunnels, and fucking Billy Hargrove.

If Indiana State accepts her, then she can survive college.

"Did it help?" Nancy asks. "Writing about it, I mean."

"I don't know." Joyce mentioned Will still draws about his experiences as a coping mechanism, something that psychiatrist from the lab encouraged, but Stevie never liked writing.

Nancy brushes Stevie's hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. "Well, if it works, maybe I'll have to do it too," she says, half her mouth quirking up into her crooked smile. "Monster Fighting Girlfriends: Part Two."

"You're so lame," Stevie says.

Smile fading, her girlfriend says, "I still wish you'd let me read it. Now I'm dying to know what it said."

"It was just last year's fight," she says as Mrs. Wheeler calls their names, followed by a louder shout for the kids. "Guess we better get downstairs."

"Maybe you should write more," Nancy says, not moving, even as Stevie stands. Note cards lay scattered across the bed, color coded and filled with trig formulas. "About what happened this year. It might help."

"Help with what?" It sounds biting, and she regrets it immediately. Thankfully, Nancy's expression stays blank, unfazed.

Sighing, she says, "You've been freaking me out. Everyone out. Even my *mom's* noticed."

The only reason why Mrs. Wheeler thinks something's wrong with Stevie is because she feels guilty for giving Billy Max's location, like all that was her fault. "Noticed what?"

"Getting your head hit like that?" Nancy says. "And then not treated for hours? You're not really...you anymore."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean you're more comfortable around my brother and his friends than even *me*," she says, standing, "and you're always jumpy. It's like you never stopped being in high alert. Stevie, you don't smile anymore."

Like we're in love.

You're not really you.

Stevie can't breathe. The world draws close, dim. If Nancy thinks she isn't herself anymore, then she doesn't—then she'll leave, and—and Steve will have no one, but she needs someone, needs Nancy, almost thunderstorms and Kit Kats and fuck you kisses, a tether to the rest of them because without her *Stevie is alone with Christmas lights nails in baseball bats tunnels and dark dark the eyes watching in the*

Suddenly she's on the ground, head between her knees, and Nancy's saying, "Breathe, Stevie, breathe, in and out, in and out. Okay, okay. Breathe. There you go."

She focuses on the cold wood floor against her feet, on the warm of Nancy's hands gripping her upper arms. Closer than before, Mrs. Wheeler calls out, "Are you girls okay?"

"Give us a minute, Mom." Nancy's voice is raised, but Stevie hears it only distantly. Lower, her girlfriend says, "That's better," and rubs circles across Stevie's back.

After a while, her heart rate calms and her head clears. "I'm sorry," she says without looking up. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," says the girl she loves. "Do you need a second?"

Stevie nods, though she isn't sure she means it, so Nancy stands and leaves the room. What's left is Stevie's own harsh breathing, the lamp light's soft glow, and the imaged eyes watching her through the window, hidden in the dark.